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ABSTRACT

Accrediting associations assess colleges in order to find out what has been accomplished, and to find out how it might be better accomplished. Assessment of educational outcomes can be a useful way to demonstrate the success of alternative means. However, accrediting agencies do not rely exclusively on outcome measures, since they only assess what has been effective in the past. Outcome measures do not necessarily assess current conditions or predict the future. Accrediting agencies assess students, institutions, and programs according to the institutions stated purposes and objectives, which include the educational achievements of their students. The acceptability of the institutional objectives may also be examined. There is no national agreement, given the heterogeneity of American higher education, on the definition of what it means to have earned a particular degree. Assessment should be performed by the accrediting agencies, the institution, and the states. Difficulties associated with assessment include the complexity of goals, participants, and outcomes; use of the information; the temptation to use shortcuts; and the need for better measurement techniques. (GDC)

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The Why, What and Who of Assessment: The Accrediting Association Perspective

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The Why, What and Who of Assessment: The Accrediting Association Perspective

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As a former physicist I have a strong longing to begin with a clear and confining definition of the term "assessment." But as a present pragmatist—as well as a linguistic empiricist—I cannot bear to constrain a word that has come to have so many meanings to so many people. The fact is that this poor word has been pressed into service as a prestigious substitute for everything from the plain vanilla of "testing," to the pistachio walnut rum raisin of "a multidimensional process of judging the individual in action."[1]

So let us agree that "assessment" will mean any activity, from the simplest to the most complicated, directed at reaching a judgement. That won't please the purists among us anymore than it pleases me; but it may not be all bad, as an anecdote may illustrate:

I cannot now remember where I saw it, but long ago I read a comment of Percy William Bridgman, the distinguished physicist. Bridgman, who as a promulgator of operationalism had quite a reputation as a philosopher of science, was once asked how he defined "the scientific method." Undoubtedly annoyed at the neat recipes popular in elementary textbooks, Bridgman replied, "The scientific method is doing your damndest." Since the corpus of Bridgman's work shows clearly that he paid full attention to the doctrines of reproducible experiments, theories based on valid data, and full public disclosure of mistakes—all those ingredients of the textbook definitions of "scientific method"—the remark may be as puzzling as it is memorable. But I think it illustrates a distinction helpful in discussing assessment: the distinction between doing and validating. A Bridgman doesn't have a set of rigid guidelines to tell him in advance how

to do an experiment; in the doing he "does his damndest"; afterward he is concerned whether what he has done meets necessary criteria. Bridgman was saying that "the scientific method"—despite its name—is not a method we use to do scientific work; it is a way of telling whether what we have done is scientific work. Not many textbooks make that distinction, and many an eager student, searching for rules to guide his or her work, has been misled.

So with assessment: the question burning in our colleges is "How to do it?" Our temptation is to provide a list of rules and an "assessment method." Alas, rules may be helpful in telling whether what has been done is assessment, but they are misleading and frustrating as marching orders for novice assessors. Assessment (or evaluation) theory is still embryonic, and the most we can do is to teach how to identify available instruments (much as the science teacher identifies instruments and techniques) and provide case studies (as the science teacher provides papers telling how someone else did something similar). To do assessment you "do your damndest": testing here, interviewing there, using results separately, or mixing everything together. We have some ways of telling whether the result is right or not, but so far no one has a way of telling what to do. With that observation, unhelpful as it may be, I proceed to Why, What and Who.

Why

Why assess the outcomes of higher education? The classic answer says we do it for two reasons: to find out what has been accomplished, and to find out how we might accomplish it better. Accrediting associations are interested in both reasons.

Accrediting associations assess institutions and programs in part to find out what they have accomplished. If the result is that they have accomplished at least an acceptable level of excellence, the institution or program passes one—but only one—criterion for accreditation. To say this in another way: accreditation of an institution or program rests in part on the assessment of institutional or program outcomes. That fact surprises some people, who have a vision of accreditation as concerned exclusively with narrow requirements of resources and processes. That accreditors make judgements based *exclusively* on the number of books in the library, the number of full-time faculty members, and the distribution of hours between class and laboratory is an idea that dies hard.

But die it did: formally about 50 years ago; actually perhaps 10 years ago; virtually ever since the beginning of postsecondary accreditation some 70 years ago. One reason is that requirements of resources and processes at best provide necessary conditions for education, but not sufficient ones: books in a library may be necessary if a student is to study; but books in a library do not ensure that a student does study.

Given the identification of accreditation with the requirements of resources and processes, it may be startling to observe that such requirements may not be even necessary. Take as an example requiring full-time faculty members: why do you need full-time faculty members to have acceptable educational quality? Once you say why they're needed, consider whether there are alternative ways to meet those needs. There are such alternatives, and some institutions have used them. If an institution can show that its graduates, taught by part-time instructors, perform as well as graduates of an institution using full-time instructors, the institution is showing that an accrediting requirement of full-time faculty is not necessary for educational quality. The test needs to be not just what the institution has, but also what it does. That means looking at outcomes. Here is another reason for assessing outcomes: it can be a way to demonstrate the success of alternative means. Outcomes assessment can open the door to fruitful alternatives in educational procedures.

Outcomes assessment can also help identify where things might be done better, and accrediting associations have from the beginning been concerned with institutional and program improvement. At the most elementary level, disappointing outcomes raise the question, "Could we do better?" Sophisticated outcome assessments help to identify where we could do better. This is, for example, a primary use of outcomes measures at Northeast Missouri State University.[2]

Accrediting associations do not place exclusive reliance on outcomes. An obvious reason is the undeveloped state of outcome measures; even institutions that have devoted much effort to assessing outcomes appear to improvise much of the time, and the most ardent advocates of outcome assessment acknowledge that much work needs to be done.

A more fundamental reason, which makes clear that assessing outcomes cannot be the exclusive means of judging institutions or programs, is that outcome measures are by their very nature retrospective. That is, they can at most tell us what has happened in the past; they cannot assess current conditions or give an estimate of future success or failure. That characteristic of outcome measures seems to me obvious, but I don't find it emphasized in the literature. Yet obvious it is: the successful graduates

of the Yale Law School reflect what the School was, not what it is; after all, the graduates are not there now. Only by combining information about outcomes with knowledge of how they were achieved and of how present resources and processes compare with those of the past can we reach valid conclusions about the present state of an institution. You will note that in making this criticism of outcomes assessment I am not discarding it; I am merely saying that the questions we wish to answer in accreditation need more information than outcomes alone can provide.

What

What should be assessed? We need to be clear about two things: the object of assessment (students, institution, program) and the characteristics to be assessed. Accrediting associations assess institutions and programs, but they are not indifferent to assessment of students. The reason is that the doctrine of accreditation says that institutions and programs are to be assessed against their stated (and acceptable) purposes. Among those purposes for educational institutions must be goals for the educational achievements of their students. Thus assessing whether an institution or program is achieving its purposes includes whether its students are achieving satisfactory educational goals.

Educational outcomes are, of course, only part of the outcomes of higher education, and our assessment cannot be restricted to them. Accrediting associations ask institutions to provide outcome assessment also for their research activities and their work that falls under the rubric of "public service." Here assessment mechanisms are very rudimentary, partly because these activities loom large in only a few institutions, but mostly, I suspect, because no one has put much thought into how to do it.

Underlying the assessment of outcomes are the purposes an institution aims to achieve, and one of the greatest problems institutions have is stating clearly what they wish to accomplish. Without clarity of purpose it is impossible to judge whether purposes have been achieved; if you don't know what outcomes you want, you can't decide what outcomes to assess. The current emphasis on outcome assessment has helped the accrediting associations in their efforts to have institutions make clear what their purposes are.

Assessing the outcomes of higher education thus brings a focus on the goals of institutions of higher education: Are they worthy? Are they

appropriate? Are they acceptable? That suggests that the goals themselves need to be assessed—assessment upon assessment. Accrediting associations also do this, albeit more informally, using general ideas of social acceptability as the criteria for judging institutional and program goals. But in any accrediting assessment of goals lies an underlying concern: that the educational outcomes of an institution be appropriate to the credential it confers. That implies an understanding of the meaning of a degree, and in the heterogeneity of American higher education that understanding is unexpressed, being close to the idea that "I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it." Perhaps the assessment movement will help define what a bachelor's degree is (to say nothing of a doctor's degree). I doubt that it will, and that raises an interesting point: if we can't say what achievements identify the holder of a degree, how can we assess whether the holder has accomplished those achievements? Assessing outcomes follows from knowing what outcomes are desired. At a fundamental point—defining the credentials we confer—we have no national agreement.

Who

And so we come to who should assess the outcomes of higher education. The accrediting associations have a clear party line on this one: both you and we should do it.

Who are you? In our view, you are any interested party, but especially the institution itself. The concern of the accrediting associations is not only with judging whether an institution or program is of acceptable quality, but—and increasingly—with institutional improvement. The emphasis on self-assessment has grown as the accrediting associations have learned that self-assessment is an effective means not only to identify areas needing improvement but also to convince those who must make the improvements that they should make them. Higher education may be populated with grown up men and women, but they still have the peculiarities of human beings. The private assessment of institutional weaknesses is more effective than the exhortation of the accrediting association in effecting improvements—just as the private assessment of our corpulent self in the bedroom mirror is more effective than the directive of our physician in inducing weight loss.

There are other players in the game—state agencies, for example—and they too should join in assessing the outcomes of higher education.

But note that the different players may have somewhat different ideas about what assessment results are needed. Accrediting associations ask about merit: whether an institution or program is operating at an acceptable level of quality. An institution may ask also about efficiency: whether quality can be maintained with fewer resources. A state agency may ask about worth: whether the state needs two accredited schools, or whether one could be closed without significant social loss. The who of assessment can affect the what of assessment.

There is a fundamental concern of all parties for the quality of the educational enterprise, suggesting that a sharing of assessments would be advantageous. Yet surprisingly such sharing is not common. Accrediting associations find that institutions and programs like to start out fresh to conduct the self-assessment and gather the data the accreditors ask for. Sometimes there seems to be the conviction that we want it that way, that work already done just can't be pertinent. That isn't true—good, continuing institutional assessment is just what accreditation needs, and I can say from personal experience that the continuing assessment programs of such institutions as Northeast Missouri State and Alverno College mesh well with accrediting needs.

Why do we tend to keep assessments in separate compartments? The problem seems to me to be related to our emotions about assessment. That portly fellow in the mirror doesn't want to wear a sign that says, "Fat"; he's willing to drop a pound or two, but it has to be done quietly. Many an institution is fearful that public knowledge of the "concerns" of its accrediting association will be translated into enrollment losses if not worse; it wants to improve, but wants to do it quietly. Assessment of outcomes carries with it the possibility that the outcomes will not be what we would like; who does the assessment can strongly affect the public disclosure of distasteful results. That, in turn, can lead to attempts to control disclosure if not the assessment process itself. The validity of assessment results often depends on the cooperation of those who are assessed; even doing one's damndest won't work if the object of assessment is too uncooperative. Valid assessment of outcomes requires sensitivity to the human and social context; it is not just routine application of instruments or techniques.

Cautions and Improvements

From the perspective of accrediting associations we assess outcomes of

higher education to find out how well goals have been achieved, and, by combining with other information, to suggest how achievement can be improved. We assess institutions and programs against the achievement of their worth goals; and we assess those goals against social acceptability. We urge that institutions and programs themselves do such assessment along with accrediting agencies and other parties at interest. That sounds sensible, and I would be surprised if anyone objected to it.

Another piece of accreditation policy is that whatever is done could be done better. So I can't say that the assessment of the outcomes of higher education needs no improvement: that would be contrary to the dogma promulgated by the organization that puts the food on my table. Besides, I happen to think that we really could do better. Why don't we?

Fundamentally the reason is that in higher education we deal with complex human students immersed in complex social organizations. That results in complex goals and correspondingly complex outcomes. Even getting agreement on goals can be difficult. To illustrate, consider this goal: every college graduate should be prepared to move smoothly into immediate employment. Sounds good, but we don't agree on that goal even for some apparently obvious cases; if we did, we would withdraw accreditation from every law school that had a graduate fail the bar examination, since you can't practice until you pass—but that would mean that every law school would lose accreditation, and probably Harvard would object. Complex goals and complex outcomes make assessment difficult.

Even more difficult is making assessment of outcomes serve institutional improvement. What we know—and our friends at Northeast Missouri and Alverno certainly agree—is that such use of outcomes assessment is hideously difficult and probably so strongly dependent on the institution that case studies cannot serve as models. They are examples of what can be done by doing one's damndest and illustrate well that doing assessment is different from knowing that an assessment is valid.

When tasks are difficult we sometimes become impatient and take shortcuts. The current attention to assessment of outcomes seems to me to be subject to abuse as some, often with the best will in the world, undertake assessment because it is fashionable, pressing into service whatever assessment instruments are available, whether or not they are appropriate to the purpose to be served. Because it is easier to use an assessment instrument than it is to agree on desirable goals and devise appropriate assessment of outcomes toward those goals, we may well see misuse of existing tests and other measures. Indeed, we have already seen

the SAT taken in some quarters as a definitive measure of scholastic achievement. A particular danger here, it seems to me, is misguided legislative zeal in adopting statewide testing programs without differentiation among institutions within the state.

To help with the difficult task of outcomes assessment we need more and better tools and procedures; these are the analogues of the scientist's instruments and techniques. Here organizations like ETS and ACT can serve as instrument makers, devising ways by which various outcomes might be assessed. We also need examples: these are the analogues of the scientist's literature describing the work of others. Here we need better ways to share case studies of institutions that are doing their damndest to assess outcomes; most of that information is now buried in ephemeral newsletters and internal documents. Without better tools and procedures, without more examples to suggest ideas and provide the caution of failures, we will continue to fumble. I understand present fumbling—we have never learned how to do something new without making mistakes—but we must lower the incidence of fumbling. That is why we must be concerned not only with the assessment of outcomes but also with the improvement of the assessment of outcomes.

Accrediting associations have been promoting outcomes assessment for a long time; we believe that it is an essential part of certifying institutional quality and promoting institutional improvement. It is comforting to have others help push with us for outcomes assessment. I hope that all our pushing can move higher education toward more and better assessment of outcomes, both to demonstrate that higher education is doing what it should do and to help it do its work better.

Footnotes

1. Loacker, et al. "Assessment in Higher Education: To Serve the Learner," in Adelman (ed.), *Assessment in American Higher Education*, Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 1986

2. *In Pursuit of Degrees with Integrity: A Value Added Approach to Undergraduate Assessment*, Washington, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1984. A shorter description is to be found in Ewell (ed.) *Assessing Educational Outcomes*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.